

# Ole Bull's New Norway

**O**LE Bornemann Bull, a popular violinist, ardent Norwegian and friend of America, purchased more than seventeen square miles of land in Pennsylvania's northern mountains in 1852 and set in motion his plan for a thriving colony of fellow Norwegians.

The confidence that he expressed in his venture inspired several hundred of his land-hungry countrymen to cross the Atlantic to farm, ply their trades and raise families among these mountains. The tract of land to which they came, but which most eventually departed, is a scenic woodland situated in the southeast corner of Potter County and is now, in large part, within the Susquehannock State forest. The sites of two of its settlements, New Norway and Valhalla, are in Ole Bull State Park.

Ole (pronounced OH-lay) Bull was born in Norway in 1810, and as he grew, his awareness of the events and movements which were giving shape to the future of Europe grew also. In 1815, with Napoleon's conquests at an end, Europe's major powers, acting at the Congress of Vienna, re-established and redrew the political boundaries of the continent. In the midst of these events a sense of national identity was growing.

Among its acts, the Congress confirmed the claim of the royal house of Sweden to sovereignty over Norway. Bull was a patriot and he deplored the Swedes' refusal to recognize Norway's independence, and responded to it by joining artists and writers in the "Young Norway" movement. Their purpose was to revive the culture of their people and free it from the influence of both Sweden and Denmark. Moreover, convinced that cultural independence could not flourish until political separation had been achieved, the youthful musician and his friends staged frequent demonstrations against the Swedish authorities.

Ole Bull's ambition to revitalize Norwegian arts led him to the founding in 1849 of the National Theater at Bergen, the town of his birth. Aided by



*Ole Bull*

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a number of kindred spirits, he planned the theater for the staging of native drama and music and for the encouragement of Norwegian art. Bull's dream was ultimately disappointed, for within two years the theater closed. From it, however, emerged a playwright who was destined to achieve lasting fame, Henrik Ibsen, whom Bull had selected as a writer and stage manager. It has been surmised that Ibsen's most famous character, Peer Gynt, was created with Ole Bull as the model, for the characteristics of the two show a striking resemblance. As for music, Bull was not only a performer, he was also a composer, and among his works were several that expressed his great love of Norway.

The violinist was also an admirer of the United States and of its institutions. He had made a triumphant tour of this country from 1843 to

1845, and had been enthusiastically acclaimed wherever he played. James Gordon Bennett was an admirer, using his newspaper, the *New York Herald*, to review with uncritical praise the genius of "the prince of violinists." Describing the effect of his first performance, the *Herald* exulted: "At the close of some of his wonderful cadences, the very musicians in the orchestra flung down their instruments and stamped and applauded like madmen." A few critics believed it was Bull's pyrotechnic style and dramatic manner that captivated the musically uninitiated, rather than his musical accomplishment.

Bull's admiration for his American audiences was as ardent as theirs for him. His itinerary included many of the towns and villages of the eastern United States as well as visits to Canada and Cuba. Everywhere he went he was warmly received, his sentimental nature responsive to the easy-going and democratic, if sometimes rough, manner of his New World admirers. The tour inspired his musical compositions "Niagara" and "Prairie Solitude," and the stay of several years produced an affection for America second only to the love which he had for his native Norway.

In 1852 he returned to America. He had dreamt of establishing a home in America where Norwegians, accustomed to a meager living from an unyielding soil, could prosper. After giving performances in New York and Montreal, he contacted a friend, John Hopper, who introduced him to John F. Cowan, a businessman from Williamsport, Pennsylvania. Cowan informed him of a large tract of land which he owned, having a topography reminiscent of Bull's homeland and situated along Kettle Creek near the southeast corner of Potter County, the heart of the so-called Black Forest. On May 24, 1853 (the year following that of the first settlement), John F. Cowan and his wife, Rosetta, deeded to Ole Bull eleven warrants of land in Potter County for \$10,388. The deed also defined three "reservations," which due to the restrictions they imposed on the new colony, were to lead to its demise. The reservations withheld 658 acres from the sale, thereby reserving much of the tillable land to the original owners, a fact that Bull would not realize until later. The land area included in the deed was 11,144 acres.

The area of this vast acreage was for the most part unsettled. Huge stands of virgin timber,



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*This last surviving of the houses erected by settlers in Ole Bull's colony stood until very early in the twentieth century at the site of the settlement of New Bergen.*





Norwegian Society for the Protection of Ancient Monuments

*Félicie Villeminot, first wife of Ole Bull, with their children (left to right) Alexander, Félicie, Lucie and Thorvald.*

predominantly hemlock, covered the mountains. The only transportation system in the area was a stage line that traveled between Coudersport and Jersey Shore over the Jersey Shore and Coudersport Turnpike (Route 44). There had been some scattered lumbering of pine, but the lumbering boom was to develop after the colony's demise.

The settlement began September 7, 1852, when, as reported by the *People's Journal* of Coudersport, "thirty stalwart sons of Norway" arrived in Coudersport en route to Ole Bull's new Norway. On the seventeenth of the month, 105 more colonists stopped overnight on their journey to the settlement. The founder, who was to swear allegiance to the United States in October, gave a speech concerning the new colony and its hopes. He declared, "We are founding a New Norway consecrated to liberty, baptized with independence and protected by the Union's mighty flag." Both the colonists and the people of the county predicted a bright future for the colony and for the county. Most felt that because of Ole Bull's enterprise the whole area would prosper.

Trees at the colony site were cleared, not by chopping but by the practice of "grubbing," a procedure by which the trees were removed roots

and all. This practice was too time-consuming and proved to be, like the colony itself, a mistake.

In June, 1853, the *New York Tribune* carried a story concerning a July 4 celebration to be held at Ole Bull's colony. According to the story, Bull planned and established four communities within his colony. One of these communities was New Bergen, at Carter Camp, twenty-four miles from Coudersport and eight miles from Cherry Springs. Another was Oleana, which the musician named for himself and for his mother, and which was located six miles south of New Bergen. One was New Norway, one mile south of Oleana; at this site sixteen to twenty log cabins and a schoolhouse had been erected. Finally, a short distance from New Norway was Valhalla, near which was the high point or shelf of mountain that Bull called "Nordjenskald," which provided the location for his "castle." In Norse mythology Valhalla, or Royal Hall, was the place of Odin, the god of poetry, who received military heroes after they were slain in battle.

The "castle" was described by a reporter from the *People's Journal* as "a two-story framed cottage, thirty-six by twenty feet. From it we had a view of all surrounding country and this seems to have been the object of its being built in that situa-

tion. A beautiful avenue leads to it through the forest and the visitor does not see it until he is beside it."

In 1853, with his castle uncompleted, Bull realized that his funds would soon be exhausted. Bull had given financial assistance to many of the Norwegians who came to make their homes in his colony, and it was time for him to go on tour again to earn more money. While away he repeatedly sent money to help the settlers in their struggle to survive. Only now did he realize that the reservations in the deed left him and the other colonists little but the steep hillside woodland. Much of the land that the colonists had improved turned out to be within the tract that the former owner had reserved for himself. Bull eventually despaired of the venture, and soon thereafter he sold back his holdings to John F. Cowan for the price that he had originally paid. Bull continued to help the few colonists who remained, but after a hard winter, most who were left moved to Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Ole Bull's "castle" was to meet as untimely an end as had the colony. It was sold at public sale to Dr. Edward Joerg, a German whom Ole Bull had persuaded to relinquish a medical practice in Illinois so that he could come to live in the colony. Dr. Joerg used the remains of the uncompleted castle to construct a home for himself, which he built on the eastern side of Kettle Creek south of the castle site. Dr. Joerg's home was called "The State House." It remained until 1923, when a fire reduced it to a gutted frame. It is on this site and foundation that the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania constructed the forest foreman's residence in 1929. The house is still in use.

By 1857 Bull had returned to Norway, disillusioned by the failure of his colony. The next ten years of his life he would spend close to his home in Bergen. In 1836 he had married a Frenchwoman, Félicie Villeminot, who bore him five children and who died in 1862. During a trip to America in 1869, he met Sara Thorp, of Madison, Wisconsin, who became his second wife and the mother of a daughter. In 1872, Bull returned to Norway to his final home on the Island of Lysøen,



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*Sara Thorp Bull in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she made her home for many years. Her brother Joseph was married to a daughter of the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a resident of Cambridge.*

or island of light, a 650-acre island on the North Sea, from which Sara and he made periodic visits to the United States. Along the path to the castle site in Ole Bull State Park is Lyso Spring, a beautiful spring which is now covered.

Bull died of cancer in 1880, and was buried with great ceremony in his hometown, Bergen. His colony was long past, the lumber industry was on the verge of a boom, and soon all that would remain or remind one of Ole Bull's shattered dream, New Norway, would be the few colonists who had chosen to stay, the colony's cemetery, and Ole Bull State Park (established in 1920), which contains the site of the "castle" and 117 acres that are a haven for the outdoorsman and the lover of nature.